

STATEMENT  
OF  
SENATOR DANIEL K. INOUE  
VICE CHAIRMAN  
COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
MAY 15, 2003  
HEARING  
ON  
S. 575, A BILL TO AMEND THE  
NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGES ACT

The Senate Committee on Indian Affairs meets this morning to receive testimony on S. 575, a bill to amend the Native American Languages Act to provide authority for the establishment of Native American Language Survival Schools and Native American Language Nests and for other purposes.

Historians and linguists estimate that there were between 1,000 and 2,000 distinct Native languages at the time that Europeans first set foot on this continent.

Since that time, there have been many influences brought to bear on Native people and their cultures, and few of them have been positive as they affect the preservation and ongoing vitality of Native languages

For instance, there was a time in our history when Federal policy

strongly encouraged the assimilation of Indian people. In carrying out this policy, Indian children were taken from their homes and forced to attend boarding schools, where against most Native religious beliefs, the children's hair was cut, and they were forbidden from speaking in their Native languages, or practicing any aspect of their traditions and culture, including dancing, singing, and ceremonial rites.

In contemporary times, we have seen the effects of the "English-only" movement on the speaking of other languages in this country – and on school curricula which at one time placed a premium on the learning of other languages by American students.

In my home State of Hawaii, fortunately we have a different set of circumstances.

The Native Hawaiian language is recognized as one of two official languages of the State.

Native Hawaiian language immersion programs are part of the public school curriculum, and private schools using the Native Hawaiian language as the exclusive language in which instruction in all academic subjects is carried out have more applicants than they can accommodate.

In Hawaii, we have not only kindergarten through twelfth grade Native Hawaiian language instructed curriculum in the private schools administered by Aha Punana Leo, we have a masters' degree program at the University of Hawaii at Hilo where teachers are trained to provide instruction in the Native Hawaiian language.

Many of our streets bear the names of Native Hawaiian leaders or are simply Native Hawaiian words, and ancient and traditional practices, such as hula, ho'o'ponopono, and lomi lomi are not only widely accepted but enthusiastically embraced.

Native Hawaiian traditional healers play an integral role in the provision of health care to Native Hawaiian patients.

So in Hawaii, while there was a time when the influence of the missionaries and their efforts to discourage the Native Hawaiian people from expressing their culture and their traditions and from speaking their language, we are no longer fighting those influences.

But there is a new threat to Native languages and I don't suppose that any of our well-intentioned legislators would have predicted this – but the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act are having a

significant effect on the inclusion of Native languages in school curricula, on teacher certification, and in many other areas that we will hear about today.

Some have suggested that the only solution is to take Native languages out of the public schools and to provide Native language instruction in another venue.

There are a number of programs already operating in this manner, and they have demonstrated that students can not only become proficient in their Native language, but that their academic performance is improved.

Other scientific tests of human brain development instruct us that when children become proficient in more than one language, they actually generate more brain cells and their life-long capacity for learning is enhanced.

But we also know that there are only about 155 Native languages remaining and that eighty-seven percent of these languages have been classified as either deteriorating or nearing extinction.

Native languages are losing their vitality as those who speak the

Native language pass on, and with the loss of language comes the loss of the means to convey the history, the culture, the traditions that are unique to each group of people.

We are speaking of the very survival of Native languages, and we must do our part to assure that they do survive.

Before we begin the hearing today, I want to advise the witnesses that your full statements will be made part of the hearing record, and the Committee would appreciate it if you would summarize your thoughts so that there will be sufficient time for all of the presentations.

Because of other meetings that will be taking place in the Senate, we have to complete this hearing before noon today, so I would ask all of the witnesses if they will please respect the Committee's desire that all witnesses have time to make their presentations before the hearing must be adjourned, by keeping their statements within the five-minute time frame that has been designated. Thank you.